

State parent program reunites families, cuts court costs

By Barbara Madsen, Special to the Herald

Any length of time a child spends in the uncertainty of foster care is too much, but it is particularly wrenching when that time is extended because of avoidable delays in connecting children and parents with the help they need.

The judicial branch can't stop family crises from happening, but we can and we have reduced the time Washington children spend in foster care through the Parents Representation Program.

This innovative justice program has been remarkably effective at helping parents access services, improving the efficiency of dependency hearings, speeding up reunifications and adoptions and saving money.

In a recent budget reduction document, Gov. Chris Gregoire suggested eliminating the PRP. While I understand the extreme difficulty facing lawmakers, cutting the approximately \$12 million annual budget of this program would not save those dollars; it would only shift them from reunification and other permanent solutions to higher foster care costs.

The PRP has been evaluated multiple times since its 2000 launch, and each study has shown its amazing effectiveness.

One study conducted by the Office of Public Defense and audited by the Washington State Center for Court Research showed a 36 percent increase in the rate of family reunifications when parents are represented by PRP attorneys.

The most recent independent study by the research organization, Partners for Our Children (through the University of Washington School of Social Work), showed children in foster care either reunited with their parents an average of one month earlier than without the program -- a significant time in the life of a child -- or were adopted into new families a full year earlier.

The leader of that study, Dr. Mark Courtney, wrote to lawmakers in November: "These findings are striking; precious few interventions have been shown to have any positive impact on the lives of children in foster care, let alone impacts of this magnitude."

The PRP was launched in 2000 at state lawmakers' request as more children entered foster care and "dependency" cases -- where the fate of dependent children is determined -- were bogging down in court.

A study by the Office of Public Defense showed attorneys representing parents were often overwhelmed with cases, undertrained and had no access to social workers or experts. Counties paid for parent representation out of tight budgets -- the state paid nothing.

Lack of adequate representation also meant many parents were not accessing the training they needed to be better, stronger parents.

The initial study expressed deep concerns by judges and social workers that many parents with the motivation to improve their parenting skills and lifestyles were falling by the wayside because they couldn't meaningfully participate in their own cases.

The Parents Representation Program provides state funding to counties to hire attorneys, sets a dependency case limit of 80 for each attorney, provides access to experts and social workers and sets standards that reduce continuances and increase communication between attorneys and parents.

The PRP has been so successful lawmakers have expanded it to 25 counties, including Benton and Franklin counties.

"I dread a return to the prior system," one Eastern Washington judicial officer told me upon learning that the PRP could be eliminated. "Since the advent of the Parent Representation Program, training has greatly improved, turnover has been reduced. Issues are being spotted and acted on that previously were unseen or ignored."

Another judge from Western Washington told me, "Without effective parent representation, I believe our dependency courts will come to a near halt."

The courts will certainly absorb a share of cuts in the coming legislative session, but for reasons of humanity, justice and cost savings, the Parents Representation Program should not be one of them.

-- Chief Justice Barbara Madsen serves on the Washington State Supreme Court.